Ruthless player or development partner? Britain's ambiguous reaction to China in Africa

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Abstract. British reactions to China's increasing engagement with Africa in recent years have been manifested in particularly negative and reductive ways tending to depict China's presence in Africa as destructive and self-serving, in contrast to Britain's more enlightened, supportive approach. However, more recently official discourse has begun to stress the shared outlook between British and Chinese objectives, emphasising Chinese moves towards a more constructive, development-focused approach in Africa. This article discusses the ways in which China in Africa is viewed in British political circles and assesses the degree to which such views resonate with the British sense of its own idealised identity. It suggests that the two narratives represent two sides of a dual 'liberal' approach to the problem of 'non-liberal' actors in international politics: first the tendency to reject and see them as outside the international order; and second the attempt to rehabilitate them and bring them within it. The article concludes by exploring a number of reasons for the particular ways in which Britain, China and Africa are configured, arguing that this dual conception represents a sense of ambiguity about the potential universality of liberalism.

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British elites, proud of Britain's enlightened and benign policy in sub-Saharan Africa in recent years, have only gradually begun to wake up to China's growing presence there.[1] It was as if a child, earnestly engaged in building an elaborate sandcastle has just realised that a bigger child, with a tractor and a very different concept of what a sandcastle should look like, had arrived and begun destroying and building on the same patch of sand. British reactions take two forms. The initial and popular reaction – found amongst backbench MPs and some government

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[1] Throughout the article I will be discussing sub-Saharan Africa (hereafter simply referred to as 'Africa'). In ignoring north Africa I am reflecting the British policy understanding of the continent which groups north Africa in with the Middle East (MENA). Egypt, Libya and Algeria, for example, are therefore treated as part of a region which offers more pressing and complex political, economic and security interests and challenges to that of sub-Saharan Africa which is largely viewed in terms of aid and development. The exception to this is South Africa which has always appeared to present exceptional political and trade interests.

officials who work on Africa, and amplified in the media – has been one of hostility and suspicion: 'British space' has been invaded, 'British projects' spoiled. A second view has also begun to emerge in government discourse, which suggests that China's engagement is to be welcomed as potentially positive and beneficial for Africa; that China, with help from Britain, might come to realise the benefits of the international consensus on how to engage with Africa.[2] These represent a pragmatism, according to Chris Alden, that has seen a series of cautious attempts to engage with Chinese activity on the continent.[3] More recently they have become overtly welcoming, suggesting that China and Britain actually share objectives to some degree in Africa, and that it might be possible to further reconcile their work there.

How far is this new pragmatic perspective displacing the hostile reaction, or are these reflections of persistently diverse and even contradictory reactions to China's engagement in Africa? More broadly, what can such reactions tell us about tendencies to demonise and socialise within International Relations (IR) – most particularly in the context of a state that sees itself as part of a liberal international community, and its reaction to states that lie beyond this community?

This article attempts to explore and explain elite British reactions to China's engagement in Africa. It draws on interviews with British politicians and officials who work on African policy or engage there through the work on All-Party Parliamentary Groups on Africa, and on government documents and speeches produced by the Foreign Office (FCO) and Department for International Development (DfID). Through an examination of discourses about Africa and China's role there, it establishes a picture of the way in which ideas of British-African-Chinese relationships are constituted, and makes suggestions as to how these stem from and help reinforce a sense of state identity.

In the first section I will argue that the British conception of Africa and its policy in recent years there is best understood within a constructivist ontology. The role of ideas in forming British self-conception and policy is particularly resonant in Africa because of the relative lack of British material interests there. This can be highlighted through a comparison with recent French and US policy in Africa both of which are rooted in more tangible interests. It is therefore more plausible to understand the French and US attitudes towards Africa and Chinese engagement there within a more realist framework, while the role of ideas and identity play a much larger role in the British case. The rest of the article discusses the two British approaches to Chinese engagement in Africa, drawing on official policy documents and interviews with British politicians and officials, and exploring historical parallels. Section two explores historical comparisons and precedents, focusing on British demonisation of rival European powers during the colonial project in Africa. The third section describes the modern demonisation of China by British policy elites; and the fourth discusses the more rational and newly-emerging discourse that seeks to describe a new British relationship with China over Africa as one of tutor in development, bringing China within wider liberal rationales.

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[2] For an example of this more cautious approach which both welcomes the potential benefits of China's engagement in Africa, while gently pointing towards the importance of promoting good governance, see DfID fact sheet: 'Promoting Growth in Africa: working with China' (2006), available at: {http://www.dfid.gov.uk/Documents/publications/china-africa-factsheet.pdf} cited on 7 July 2009.

[3] Chris Alden, *China in Africa* (London: Zed Books, 2007), p. 108.

Finally, I will explore the possible meanings of such depictions. I will suggest that both the demonisation of China in this African context, and the idea that China can be civilised by Britain, are reflections of a particular liberal sense of self. This draws on Dipesh Chakrabarty's suggestion that liberal historicism views non-liberal others as both external to the civilised world, in opposition to it, destabilising and potentially destructive, and as potentially – perhaps inevitably – redeemable, able to be reconciled to the liberal, rational, universal logic. Liberalism both 'recognises and neutralises difference'.[4] The particular example of British perceptions of China in Africa highlights the tension between this dual approach to difference and, I suggest, illustrates an ambiguity with the idea that liberalism can be universalised – that the inevitability and logic of liberalism which must absorb all non-liberal actors is constantly undermined by the tendency to objectify or reify the villainous, outlying 'other'. The conclusion of the article explores the extent to which both views – although they exist in tension – might have come to underwrite a British subjectivity and identity: one in providing an alternative 'other', foil to the subject's logic and rightness; the other as an affirmation that alternatives are unviable and must succumb to the logic of liberal modernity.

Constructing British policy in Africa

Peter Hays Gries, in his study of Chinese foreign policy, argues that international relationships shape national self-perception through the interdependence of discourse, policy and identity. In his example, the relationship between China and America is partially constitutive of a collective Chinese identity.[5] It can also, of course, be argued that identity shapes international relations: the way we see ourselves defines the way we relate to others internationally. This approach departs from realist 'interest-based' accounts that suggest that foreign policy and international relations are purely or largely generated by domestic or state material interests, in particular security, geo-political strategy and economic opportunity.

In the case of Africa, in particular, the relationship between British identity and the imagination of Africa and British policy there were redefined in particular ways during the Blair era, driven by key actors' ethical and emotional attachment to Africa; by the Labour Party's identification with particular causes such as the anti-colonial and anti-Apartheid movements; by broader historical conceptions of Britain's benign role in Africa in, for example, the abolition of the slave trade and the civilising colonial mission; and by the way these resonated with modern British conceptions of Africa popularised by celebrity-driven aid initiatives and the British media's depictions of Africa as an object of pity and charity which could be rescued through British efforts.[6]

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[4] Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: postcolonial thought and historical difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), p. 48.

[5] Peter Hays Gries, *China's New Nationalism: pride, politics and diplomacy* (Berkley: University of California Press, 2004), p. 19.

[6] New Labour's adoption in 1997 of a foreign policy with an 'ethical element', and the establishment of DfID, were part of an attempt to differentiate itself from the outgoing Conservative administration which had pursued a more overtly realist foreign policy, in which international development was relatively neglected. On Africa in particular, its approach had been defined by what Labour regarded

Ideationally, such depictions were brought to play within a liberal cosmopolitan order promoted by Blair – described for example in his 1999 Chicago speech on the doctrine of the international community – which promoted liberal intervention and the responsibility to protect as moral imperatives. In doing this Blair sought to identify and to shape an implicit understanding of a liberal international community within which he wanted to define Britain.

The self-understanding of this liberal international community rests on implicit or 'deep' theory and assumptions about individualism, choice, rights and liberty.[7] For my purposes here, there are two important liberal themes that identify 'liberal states' and differentiate them from 'illiberal states'. The first is a cosmopolitan sense of the universality of morality that is rooted in the individual. It leads to the idea that it is possible and desirable to frame and promote a set of universal norms, embodied, for example, in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the International Criminal Court that promotes and pursues universal justice. Non-liberal states are those whose political elites deny or resist these; and they are the states upon which the reforming efforts of such institutions are focused. The discourse tends to assume an affinity between non-elites in these countries and liberal values, leading to the idea that international liberal actors support and speak for ordinary people. The second is an implicit sense of progress, which is due to the growth of rationality. Political differences are depicted as a struggle between 'progressive' liberals versus ideological, backward-looking or unenlightened non-liberals – the 'outlying other'. The progress of rationality should see an increasing convergence as modernisation converts and harmonises. One key way for this to happen is through processes of 'socialisation', which, for many liberals, is achieved through multilateralism; the coordinating of national policies in international forums and institutions (nominal multilateralism), and the increasing sharing of norms and principles (qualitative multilateralism).[8] Liberals are ostensibly optimistic – they assume that persuasive undercurrents will gradually lead to the reform and rehabilitation of non-liberals.

This approach supported a host of British Africa initiatives including military intervention in Sierra Leone to restore a democratically-elected regime, substantial increases in aid and debt-write-off for the poorest, reform-minded African governments, and culminated in a 'year for Africa' in 2005 during which Blair launched his Commission for Africa.[9] And it resonated with – and in time contributed to – the broader liberal international consensus on Africa defined around the promotion of 'universal' goods such as human rights, good governance and international justice.[10] Africa as an on-going site of development and good

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as a sacrifice of principle to material interests in the refusal to impose sanctions on South Africa in the 1980s, and neglect, as in the failure to intervene to prevent the genocide in Rwanda in 1994. The establishment of DfID, in particular, was meant to demonstrate the increased importance of international aid, and the separation of the aid agenda from the more 'political' FCO. DfID came to represent the 'moral wing' of government. See Julia Gallagher, *Britain and Africa under Blair: in pursuit of the good state* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, forthcoming, 2011).

[7] David Williams, 'Liberalism and "Development Discourse"', *Africa*, 63:3 (1993), pp. 419–29.

[8] John Ruggie, 'Third Try at World Order? America and multilateralism after the Cold War', *Political Science Quarterly*, 109:4 (1994), pp. 553–70.

[9] For an account of Blair's Africa policies, see Tom Porteous: *Britain in Africa*, (London: Zed Books, 2008).

[10] Tom Young: '"A project to be realised": global liberalism and contemporary Africa', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies*, 24:3 (1995), pp. 527–46.

projects came to engender a sense of Britain as an energetic and potent international actor, playing a key role in an idealised liberal international order. Thus Africa in recent years became an important expression of Britain's best liberal self for Britain's political elites.[11]

The idea of British aggression or pursuit of self-interest is largely absent from this depiction. Instead, Britain engages with Africa because it is a 'moral cause', a 'duty' and 'the right thing to do'.[12] This is far more than a rhetorical approach: the idea of Africa as a cause for Britain, and of the British state engaging there in a pure and disinterested way is an important component of British state actors' conception of themselves and the political system they engage in. Africa matters to Britain as a representation of an 'ethical foreign policy', a point of differentiation from other parts of state activity and policy, and from the ways in which other parts of the world engage there. As such, it contributes to a sense of British identity as a generous and benign actor, projecting an ideal Britain – generous, altruistic, capable and just – onto Africa.[13]

The traction of such an approach has been increased by the relative lack of tangible British interests in the continent. According to Christopher Clapham, this was a significant factor behind British indifference towards Africa from independence up to the Blair era.[14] However, the revival of engagement with Africa under Blair has been interpreted by some as being rooted in more material interests such as pacifying dissatisfied Labour Party members, maintaining a position of power over Africa, or promoting capitalist relations internationally.[15] Elements of self-interest doubtless do exist – Africa's oil reserves are exploited by British companies, the British arms industry occasionally wins lucrative contracts from African governments.[16] These tend to be either neutralised under a harmonies of interest discourse – promoting trade supports our economy and their development – or allowed to quietly bubble along under the surface, occasionally popping up to embarrass the FCO, as, for example, happened with BAE deals in Tanzania and South Africa. In contrast, efforts to reign in UK commercial interests where they were thought to be in conflict with benign objectives have been made, as for example in the ending of the link between trade and aid, the heavy pressure put on pharmaceutical companies to make cheap anti-retroviral drugs available in

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[11] This approach was shared across the mainstream political spectrum, by Labour, Conservative and Liberal Democrat MPs, Labour ministers, special advisors and officials from DfID and the FCO. Julia Gallagher, 'Healing the Scar: idealism, Africa and British policy under Blair', *African Affairs*, 108:432 (2009), pp. 435–51.

[12] Blair described British policy in Africa in these terms in a speech he made in Ethiopia: Tony Blair, 'Speech on Africa, Addis Ababa, 7 October 2004', *Downing Street Website*, {www.number-10.gov.uk} cited on 16 March, 2006.

[13] Gallagher, 'Healing the Scar'.

[14] Christopher Clapham, *Africa and the International System: the politics of state survival* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

[15] See David Chandler, 'Rhetoric without Responsibility: the attraction of "ethical" foreign policy', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 5:3 (2003); David Slater and Morag Bell, 'Aid and the Geopolitics of the Post-Colonial: critical reflections on New Labour's overseas development strategy', *Development and Change*, 33:2 (2002); Paul Cammack, 'Global Governance, State Agency and Competitiveness: the political economy of the Commission for Africa', *British Journal of Politics and International Relations*, 8 (2006).

[16] For a discussion on Britain's rather small interest in African oil (chiefly in Angola and Nigeria), see Porteous, *Britain in Africa*, pp. 43–4. For a discussion of the UK arms trade with Africa, see Ian Taylor, *The International Relations of Sub-Saharan Africa* (New York: Continuum, 2010), pp. 39–41.

Africa, and attempts to restrict oil companies operating in the Niger Delta pursuing environmentally damaging practices.[17]

Since 9/11 the idea that British foreign policy in Africa has been shaped by concern over international terrorism – often linked to the opportunities offered to it by weak states – has also been argued.[18] I think this has been overplayed, often due to the tendency to conflate British and US approaches to Africa and security. There are substantial differences in the historical and ideological engagement between the US and UK in Africa with the idea of Africa and Britain in Africa maintaining a stronger hold in British officials' imaginations. Moreover, British institutions are very different, with DfID playing a far more assertive part in the shaping of British Africa policy than USAID does in America. The view of Africa as outside foreign policy as usual has been reinforced by the growing clout of DfID in Africa where DfID posts usually exceed FCO posts in size and budget.[19] This has been supported by the influence of key British politicians and officials in recent years who have identified themselves closely with the line promoted by the development agencies, the churches and key charismatic figures such as Bob Geldof and Bono.[20] If foreign policy is directed within a melting pot of varying interests and ideas, the mix has been heavily dominated since 1997 by the sense of Britain's 'ideal mission' in Africa. Indeed, it remains difficult to establish the existence of tangible interests in countries such as Sierra Leone, Rwanda and Uganda, all of which receive large amounts of British support.

The British approach can be contrasted with those of France and the US where more overt interest-based approaches lend themselves more to a realist interpretation. France, for example, while also holding its relationship with Francophone Africa as intrinsic to its identity, has tended to pursue material interests far more energetically and openly.[21] The US, on the other hand, has traditionally ignored much of Africa, motivated by the perception that there are virtually no tangible interests there.[22] More recently, Bill Clinton became interested prioritising a development agenda in Africa, something that was taken up by George W. Bush, especially in a high-budget AIDS programme and, since 9/11, concerns over terrorism in east Africa, coupled with Africa's significant contribution to US energy requirements, have led to a more substantial military engagement.[23]

Interestingly, the approach which comes closest to British self-idealisation is an older Chinese conception of its engagement in Africa, a conception that survives

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[17] Interviews with FCO and DfID officials (2007–2009).

[18] Jan Bachmann and Jana Honke, '"Peace and Security" as counterterrorism? The political effects of liberal interventions in Kenya', *African Affairs*, 109:434 (2010).

[19] Interviews with FCO and DfID officials (2007–2009).

[20] Geldof and Bono have both been drafted in to support the political parties' development agendas. For example, Geldof was a key player in Blair's Africa Commission, and was later recruited by David Cameron to help formulate Conservative policy on aid. Bono has made appearances at both parties' annual conferences. Both they, alongside British development NGOs and churches, were particularly vocal in supporting Blair's 'year for Africa' in 2005, formulating and promoting the Make Poverty History Campaign. See Graham Harrison, 'The Africanization of Poverty: a retrospective on "Make Poverty History"', *African Affairs*, {doi:10.1093/afraf/adq025}.

[21] On this, see Guy Martin, 'Continuity and Change in Franco-African Relations', *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 22:1 (1995).

[22] See Todd Moss, 'US Policy and Democratisation in Africa: the limits of liberal universalism', *The Journal of Modern African Studies*, 33:2 (1995).

[23] Nicolas van der Walle, 'US Policy towards Africa: the Bush legacy and the Obama administration', *African* Affairs, 109:434 (2010); Taylor, *The International Relations of Sub-Saharan Africa*, pp. 24–34.

both in current Chinese state rhetoric and popular Chinese conceptions of Africa and China's role there. Julia Strauss, in her discussion of the Chinese state's representation of its approach to Africa, illustrates the ways in which policy is rationalised and idealised in terms of China's very different ideologies of self-determination, non-interference and the sanctity of sovereignty, and solidarity between former colonies and fellow-developing countries. This was a key driver of aid projects like the Tazara Railway, built in Tanzania and Zambia by the Chinese in the 1960s, which was conceived as reflecting a Chinese ethos. 'The success of the friendship railroad was ascribed to elements that were in microcosm projections of China's best revolutionary self.'[24] Strauss makes the point that in content and degree, China's engagement with the continent has moved far from disinterested aid projects like the Tazara Railway towards more straightforwardly self-interested investment, but much of the original ethos survives in rhetoric. 'China's discourse on Africa continues to propagate a vision of China as a uniquely moral international actor.'[25]

Support for this comes too from Simon Shen's research on the Chinese online communities' perceptions of Africa which suggests that the state's idealised depictions of China's relationships in Africa find popular resonance.[26] In his examination of the ways Africa is described, Shen suggests a number of factors that propel this idealisation, including the ways in which Africa's perceived backwardness and role as a pupil to China is valued as a signifier of Chinese progress, order and success, as well as an example of China's enlightened international role. For example, 'China's authoritarian model seems to be able to offer a perfect substitute for the chaos in Africa.'[27] Also, 'without this junior partner and admirer of China reflecting China's relative success, the Chinese users find it hard to flaunt their sense of superiority [. . .] The Chinese commitment to Africa still gives them [the online communities] a sense of national pride.'[28]

In this way, for both Britain and China, Africa has been a means of association with a sense of a good project. It represents a source of affirmation that the state (British or Chinese) is connected to and author of 'good'. For Britain, this is achieved through its place in the liberal international order and the expression of itself as a benign, liberal actor in Africa. Thus while foreign policy might be viewed as a composite of the various institutional rationalities, and the motivations and constructions of the actors involved, the constructivist approach which favours ideas over interests is particularly useful in the case of Britain, Africa and China in Africa.

In summary, Britain's liberal identity draws on its relationship with Africa through resonances with carefully selected historical moments when Britain 'did good' in Africa; and through Blair's cooption of Labour traditions of inter-nationalism and support for development. Africa, partly because of the relative lack of material British interests there, allows it to fit into and even lead, a liberal

[24] Julia Strauss, 'The Past in the Present: historical and rhetorical lineages in China's relations with Africa', *China Quarterly*, 199 (2009), pp. 777–95.
[25] Ibid.
[26] Simon Shen, 'A Constructed (un)reality on China's Re-entry into Africa: the Chinese online community perception of Africa (2006–2008)', *Journal of Modern African Studies*, 47:3 (2009), pp. 425–48.
[27] Ibid., p. 439.
[28] Ibid., p. 441.

international community project, and to define and express its liberalism directly through development policy. Finally, this incorporation of Africa into the British sense of itself has pervaded the political scene more widely; to the point that Britain's new coalition government has committed itself to continuing the engagement and policy.[29]

'Gin-soaked Africa': the need for a villain

British self-idealisation in Africa draws on a lineage of discourse about Britain's good role in Africa which has woven in and out of British engagement there since the abolition of the slave trade.[30] At some times, and in some hands, it has been used rhetorically to justify or disguise more venal British interests. But it has also contained a deeper and more profound meaning for many people in Britain, coming to define the way Britain has viewed itself and its role in the world as enlightened. Within this discourse there has always been the need for a villainous other – the Americans, French and Portugese during the abolition debates; the French and Belgians during the late 19th Century colonial expansion; China itself, for example during the early part of the 20th Century.[31]

Britain's representation of Africa as a site of its own grander purpose was manifest in its uniquely noble role in the abolition of the slave trade – the pursuit of what was right, against its own self-interest – is a cherished part of the British myth of itself.[32] Its colonial expansion in the late 19th Century was also represented as one of serving wider, humane interests, such as the promotion of free trade for the benefit of the world, and the promotion of progress and salvation for Africans.[33] As Alice Conklin argues, such views were more than rhetorical. 'The faith of yesterday's empire builders in the moral legitimacy of their enterprise was all but absolute.'[34] This is not to deny the more selfish motivations involved, particularly during the colonial conquest itself. However, a more 'enlightened'

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[29] For example, the Queen's speech immediately following the 2010 election promised that the new government would honour the previous government's commitment to increasing overseas aid to 0.7 per cent of GNI by 2013. See {http://www.dfid.gov.uk/Media-Room/News-Stories/2010/Firm-commitment-to-07/} cited on 17 June 2010.

[30] The colonial era allowed far more leeway to overtly aggressive approaches to Africa. The defence of British material interests – its need for markets and primary commodities, its jostling with European colonial powers for position and influence – appeared to be more natural and justifiable than are allowed in Britain today. It might therefore be argued that the colonial era contained a greater (if tacit) acknowledgement that altruism was mixed in with self-interest than is the case, certainly in Britain, today.

[31] For example, see Thomas Fowell Buxton, *The African Slave Trade and its Remedy* (London: John Murray, 1840); Adam Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost: a story of greed, terror and heroism in colonial Africa* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1999); Gary Kynoch, '"Your Petitioners are in Mortal Terror": the violent world of Chinese workers in South Africa, 1904–1910', *Journal of Southern African Studies*, 31:3 (2005).

[32] Linda Colley, *Britons: Forging the Nation, 1707–1837*, 2nd edition (New Haven, Conn. London: Yale Nota Bene, 2005).

[33] For one of the most coherent explanations of Britain's higher motives in Africa, see the memoirs of Nigeria's first British governor Frederick Lugard, *The Dual Mandate in British Tropical Africa* (London: William Blackwood, 1926).

[34] Alice Conklin, 'Colonialism and Human Rights, a Contradiction in Terms? The case of France and West Africa, 1895–1914', *American Historical Review*, 103:2 (1998), p. 419.

approach was a significant element, both rhetorically and in this sense of the British state engaging in a pure and good cause.

An important part of the way in which British actors explained and justified their role in Africa was in terms of the contrast with others with less benign intentions. Thomas Buxton, for example, details the barbaric practices of the Portugese and various slave traders from the Americas, which shocked British policymakers and public and led to the British naval blockade of west Africa in an attempt to stop the trade, and the government's support of Sierra Leone, the struggling colony for freed slaves.[35] During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the British were equally stirred up by accounts of Belgian atrocities in the Congo, brought to public attention by E. D. Morel and the sensational report by Roger Casement in 1904.[36] And the French always featured heavily in comparisons made between the welfare of the natives in British and French-owned colonies. Africans, it was argued, fared better under the British who were concerned with their material and spiritual improvement and were altruistically engaged in stamping out slavery and fetish-practices, while the French sold them cheap gin and selfishly reserved African markets for themselves.[37]

Unsurprisingly, French attempts to depict their role in a more positive light were dismissed as hypocrisy by the British. As the British Governor of Sierra Leone Edward Cardew said of the French colonies in west Africa: 'The secret of their success appears to be that they keep their motto of *"Egalite, Liberte et Fraternite"* for home consumption and do not apply it to those colonies where the people are not sufficiently educated and civilised for it.'[38] This strongly paternalistic tone echoes uncomfortably today in many of the comments made about China's corrupting influence on apparently incapable Africans.

Britain apparently needed an alter-ego in its dealings with Africa. It was as though its own 'good' could only be properly realised through the contrast that could be made with others who showed no principle in their dealings with Africa. Even while there is a sense of the mission to reform, save and enlighten the 'dark continent', always on the sidelines are the spoilers. To what extent are these an essential ingredient to the British self-conception as a 'good' actor in Africa? I will return to this question in the conclusion. First, I want to detail the modern manifestation of the spoiler to British efforts in Africa: China.

China as a villain in Africa

In the modern British account of Anglo-African relations, China takes on the role of villain once reserved for other European nations. Indeed, China's emergence in

[35] Buxton, *The African Slave Trade and its Remedy*.
[36] Hochschild, *King Leopold's Ghost*.
[37] A flavour of this can be found in a newspaper report of 1899 about the protests of liquor traffic in Africa. 'Crowded and earnest was the meeting yesterday of the Native Races and Liquor Traffic United Committee at Grosvenor House. The Duke of Westminster took the chair. In 1894, he said, the imported spirits into Lagos were valued at £117,139. Then the duty was raised to 2s a gallon, with the result that the import of 1896 was only £58,906. In proportion the natives became industrious and respectable. Contrast Dahomey under French rule, where spirits were only taxed at 8d per gallon, and the consumption rose from 1,000,000f worth in 1894 to 4,000,000f worth in 1896.' *The Star*, 'Gin-Soaked Africa' (18 May 1899), p. 2.
[38] Governor Edward Cardew to the Secretary of State for the Colonial Office (Rt Hon, Joseph Chamberlain), 28 May 1898, Government papers Colonial Office Dispatches, Sierra Leone (1898).

Africa is a potentially confusing and destabilising one. If a flattened and idealised Africa appears to confirm possibilities for good intervention by Britain as a liberal actor, an equally flattened China can be seen to represent a rejection of and threat to it, undermining both British predominance in Africa by presenting an alternative non-liberal partner, and disrupting the idealised, smooth international liberal order.

In popular British accounts of China in Africa, China is depicted as a straightforward villain. This can be seen in media discussions of China in Africa, as discussed by Emma Mawdsley,[39] and through comments made by political elites which broadly echo (if in slightly more restrained terms) the media line. The story of China as villain unfolds in four steps. First, Africa is helpless: its leaders are corrupt and/or inept; its populations battered and long-suffering. Second, the British have led the way in developing a rescue plan that will induce better behaviour from Africa's leaders towards Africa's populations. Myles Wickstead, the senior official in charge of Blair's Commission for Africa said:

> In a number of countries you don't or you haven't had the systems whereby governments can be electorally accountable with strong parliaments and whatever. So in a way I think the donor community has historically acted as a little bit of a proxy for the electorate in those countries and tried to stand up for the ordinary person, saying these sugar prices are penalising your people and shouldn't you do something about that? So I think in a way, for perfectly honourable motives, the international community has acted as a proxy and an advocate of people.[40]

This approach rests implicitly on the notion that African leaders are corrupt, bad, non-liberal or non-progressive while African populations are prototype liberal individuals waiting and wanting British representation.[41] It has led to donor attempts at political and social reform in Africa, in which continuing aid and debt relief are granted to governments in return for democratic reform, good governance initiatives and an observance of human rights. It is carried through by policies such as DfID's 'Drivers of Change' project whereby 'progressive' leadership and policy environments are encouraged.[42] In pursuing this policy, Britain has chosen an approach that is 'different from politics as usual', defining Africa as a 'noble cause', above normal grubby self-interest, emphasising its affinity with and ability to represent African people in a disinterested way.[43]

Third, it is argued that the Chinese engagement with Africa is motivated by an almost gluttonous need for raw materials and new markets, driven by a monolithic and powerful Chinese state that defines and directs policy. Unlike the British, the Chinese are all about material self-interest.[44] Because of this selfishness, the Chinese are not interested in addressing Africa's real problems – which have been defined within the prevailing universal liberal norms as those of governance and human rights abuses. And so, four, by engaging with corrupt leaders, they are spoiling Britain's good work.

[39] Emma Mawdsley, 'Fu Manchu Versus Dr Livingstone in the Dark Continent? Representing China, Africa and the West in British broadsheet newspapers', *Political Geography*, {doi; 10.1016/ j.polgeo.2008.03.006} (2008).

[40] Interview (27 June 2007).

[41] Young, 'A Project to be Realised'.

[42] See Governance and Social Development Resource Centre website: {http//www.gsdrc.org}.

[43] Blair, 'Speech on Africa, Addis Ababa, 7 October 2004'.

[44] Such a view both underestimates Chinese ideological motivations, and the plurality of Chinese actors. See Ian Taylor, *China's New Role in Africa* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2009) and Alden et al. (eds), *China Returns to Africa*.

'The Chinese are all over Africa',[45] and they 'will work with anybody. They put no conditions, make no demands, get very good deals.'[46] Given the poor records of many African governments, China's approach of working to support existing regimes is inherently damaging to Africa. 'China is a very ruthless player in Africa [. . .] China is prepared to overlook what is going on on the ground, providing its interests are served, the classic example being Sudan where they are a major investor in terms of oil and politically they block most attempts to resolve the catastrophe in Darfur.'[47]

In particular it is frequently pointed out that China's dealings with African elites are corrupting and damaging to Western attempts to inhibit their excesses. 'The list of [China's] "friends" [. . .] would not look out of place in a rogues' gallery.'[48] In particular, China's support for Robert Mugabe and Omar al-Bashir is seen as entrenching the abuse of human rights and prolonging suffering in Zimbabwe and Sudan. 'It's been very difficult to get any sanctions against the [Sudanese] regime, precisely because of the [Chinese] assertion of self-interest.'[49]

British state actors argue that Western donors' attempts to reform or remove Africa's rogues through conditionalities or sanctions, were slowly beginning to have the desired effects. But 'that's all going to go by the board if China does what it's doing'.[50]

The Chinese investment in Africa is potentially the most destabilising force that there is [. . .] If you look at Zimbabwe and the way in which the EU has tried to impose sanctions and there's been all this quiet diplomacy involving the other south African states, and then China just goes in and provides them with all their oil on the basis that they get access to a whole range of industries and markets and resources there. Faced with that it's very difficult to put pressure on a regime and pressure on UK companies [. . .] If you have an approach which is very managed, very technocratic, and therefore sometimes quite difficult for politicians to come to grips with, very idealistic, and progresses quite slowly, in a very painstaking fashion [. . .] and then China comes along and says, give us your rainforest and we'll give you a billion quid, let's forget about all this grief to get a few million from the UK, let's go with China. That's where the problem is.[51]

Because the Chinese package appears more attractive to corrupt African elites, the British will be squeezed out and Africa's poor will suffer. 'People are very apprehensive of [China's] rapid expansion in Africa. Part of our fear may well be that after a long period of being able to influence what happens in Africa, this is slipping from our grasp. Yet there are real reasons to be deeply apprehensive about what is happening.'[52]

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[45] Interview, Baroness Jenny Tonge, Liberal Democrat Spokesperson on International Development, 1997–2004 (17 May 2007).

[46] Interview, Jeremy Corbyn, MP, Chair, All-Party Parliamentary Group on Angola (31 January 2007).

[47] Interview, Chris Mullin, MP, Minister for Africa, 2003–2005 (21 March 2007).

[48] Baroness Patricia Rawlings, comments during the House of Lords Debate, 'Africa: Chinese Investment'
(6 February 2007), {http://www.theyworkforyou.com/lords/?id=2007–02–06b.593.233} cited on 19 May 2009.

[49] Interview, John Bercow, MP, Conservative Spokesman for International Development, 2003–2005 (23 April 2007).

[50] Interview, John Austin, MP, Chair, All-Party Parliamentary Group on Ethiopia (19 February 2007).

[51] Interview, Sally Keeble, MP, International Development Minister, 2002–2003 (4 June 2007).

[52] Baroness Lindsay Northover, comments during the House of Lords Debate, 'Africa: Chinese Investment' (6 February 2007), {http://www.theyworkforyou.com/lords/?id=2007–02–06b.593.233} cited on 19 May 2009.

It is not only the buttressing of Africa's corrupt regimes that disturbs British politicians. China's policy, which is depicted as following economic and political self-interest, means that its attempts to sell goods in Africa will swamp African markets and squeeze out local manufacturing. Where China does move production to Africa, it is widely believed that Chinese workers are imported, limiting local employment. Moreover, China's own rapid development presents 'a real danger that people in African countries are going to be left right behind'.[53]

A debate in the House of Lords in 2007, in which speakers lined up to agree with each other, illustrates the strength of feeling about the corrupting influence of China and the way in which this is a subject of consensus across the political parties. It expresses the common feeling that British idealism in Africa can be clearly contrasted with Chinese realism. Two quotes give a flavour:

The Chinese have shown little or no interest in issues such as the rule of law, free elections, respect for human rights and stamping out corruption. They dish out the loans, the gifts and the pet projects with no questions asked, sometimes supporting and even propping up very dubious regimes under the rubric, which is so important to them internationally, of mutual non-interference. So the infrastructure created and the new loans made may suit the African regimes concerned but may not be in the long-term interests of the host country concerned. [Compare this with] [. . .] the response of governments such as our own, which have taken an excellent lead on Africa [. . .] The enlightened world community has, by and large, got the right approach at last to Africa.[54]

What about the wonderful work in cancelling world debt? Again, Her Majesty's government have been in the forefront of that; will they watch that the new governments of Africa do not create fresh indebtedness, so that in a few years' time we find that the campaign has to start all over again [. . .] As Africans say, it is better to teach a person to fish than to give them a fish, because the chances are likely that they will get their economy going properly. Her Majesty's government have assisted countries in Africa, teaching them how to fish without necessarily just giving the fish. The Chinese are arriving, giving a lot of fish.[55]

The depiction of China as a potentially destructive player in Africa is employed over and over again as a useful foil to Britain's virtuous role there. China's role as villain becomes an amplification of the way African elites are perceived as corrupt, disruptive and outside the moral order.

China as a partner in Africa

Alongside these popular negative depictions, an alternative government discourse about China's engagement in Africa is emerging, one that suggests that Chinese actors can be civilised and absorbed – socialised – into the liberal cosmopolitan order. In this depiction, China is a potential partner in British good work in Africa, and potentially part of the international consensus. This official line on

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[53] Interview, Baroness Lindsay Northover, Liberal Democrat Spokesperson for International Development, 2003-present (14 June 2007).

[54] Lord Holme of Cheltenham, comments during the House of Lords Debate, 'Africa: Chinese Investment' (6 February 2007), {http://www.theyworkforyou.com/lords/?id=2007–02–06b.593.233} cited on 19 May 2009.

[55] Archbishop of York, comments during the House of Lords Debate, 'Africa: Chinese Investment' (6 February 2007), {http://www.theyworkforyou.com/lords/?id=2007–02–06b.593.233} cited on 19 May 2009.

China in Africa has been driven by a number of key officials from DfID and the FCO and it has recently become more visible and influential. It is defined and explained within the FCO 'Framework for Engagement' published in January 2009. The document sets out China's growing importance and explains why and how the UK hopes to benefit from a closer relationship with it. The basis for the framework is explained in Gordon Brown's introduction in which he says: 'I am convinced that Britain, Europe and the rest of the world can benefit from China's rise – provided we get our response right.'[56] The first benefits are to Britain's own interests, served by closer cooperation with China as a trading partner. The second are to the wider international objectives that China can, if brought to behave responsibly, help to serve. The chief of these are carbon emissions and African development.[57]

As Daniel Large points out, 'reactions to the perceived dramatic irruption of China into the continent are almost as revealing about the preoccupations of different involved actors concerning the rise of China in world affairs, and the track-record of previous involvement by external partners in Africa, as the nature of the Chinese engagement in the continent *per se*'.[58] The line followed in the framework document very explicitly makes a bid for Chinese affection, to 'get in there' with a partner of increasing economic and political importance. There are far more overt material interests in the UK–China relationship than in the UK–Africa relationship. Part of the question for British officials then is how to reconcile such interests with the more idealist approach to Africa policy.

There are two, interlinking answers to this problem. The first is based on the idea that China can be socialised, more specifically that Britain can 'tame' China, to bring it round to responsible and right-minded action in its international dealings (following Chakrabarty). 'This is about encouraging an approach of responsible sovereignty on international and global issues, from proliferation and international security to sustainable development and climate change. It's also about helping China to define its interests increasingly broadly.'[59] The second sees China pushed into the 'right kinds of behaviour' by increasing interdependence, a very rational account of international politics along the lines of utopian liberalism as defined by E. H. Carr: what Britain seeks to do because of its interest in the welfare of Africans, China will eventually have to pursue because of its self-interest.[60]

China's role in Africa can thus be discussed within an assumption that its objectives are essentially those of Britain. China is purported to share a British

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[56] Foreign and Commonwealth Office, *The UK and China: a framework for Engagement*, p. 3.

[57] Ibid., p. 4.

[58] Daniel Large, 'Africa's international China relations: contending imaginaries and changing politics amidst the realities of consolidation', in preparation for Jacques Mangala (ed.), *Africa in Contemporary International Relations* (Palgrave, forthcoming 2010).

[59] Foreign and Commonwealth Office, *The UK and China: a framework for Engagement*, p. 5.

[60] See E. H. Carr, *The Twenty Years' Crisis 1991–1939* (Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2001). Clare Short, Secretary of State for International Development between 1997 and 2002, described the Government's approach to 'enlightened self-interest' or harmonious interests in the following way: 'Whether it was the case in the past, and it probably was in the heyday of Empire, that what was morally right and what was in Britain's self-interest were probably contradictory, it is no longer the case. And I mean that, I'm not just rationalising it. And that's a delight because you don't have any confusion, you can just get on with what's right: it's in Africa's interest, it's in Europe's interest, it's in the world's interest.' Interview (6 June 2007).

desire to see the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and increases in aid – shared objectives that 'make it easy for Britain to work with China'.[61] This view at times appears to represent China and Britain as like-minded partners working together for the welfare of Africans. Or, assumptions about a universal, technical approach to engagement in Africa come into play. For instance, one comment frequently made by officials concerns the unsustainability of China's much-vaunted policy of non-interference which the realities of working in Africa will inevitably erode. British objectives of stability and capacity-building in Africa follow a logic which China will come to appreciate are in its own interests. China 'is slowly moving on policies of non-intervention. It's got to because Africa is complicated. It's messy. The deeper you get in, the more you need to commit to development in Africa – to respond to the many voices jumping up and down over China. They must slowly realise that they cannot just deal with state leaders.'[62]

Together, these imply a potentially harmonious conflation of British material interests and British ideological ambitions. 'We should keep working more closely with China, demonstrating why good governance, sustainable development, donor coordination and aid effectiveness improve development outcomes and will help secure China's own rapidly growing stake in the developing world.'[63]

Privately, officials are not always rosy-eyed about what they describe as China's tendency to pursue self-interest at the expense of development objectives in Africa. However, they echo the public line when they suggest that, even if the relationship can be exploitative, it also may have plenty to offer Africa, *if it is slightly redirected along the right lines*. Thus, as one official told me, 'Our ambition is to attempt to bring China into a common conversation about Africa and development there.'[64]

DfID and FCO officials are busy trying to make this work in practice. There is discussion of Chinese cooperation with DfID and attempts to define suitable joint ventures and programmes. The discourse represents China as coming late to a concern for development in Africa and Britain being in a good position to teach it what the proper direction and focus should be.[65] Once again, this is in some senses an amplification of the idealisation Britain projects onto Africa itself in its imagination of the African poor as essentially prototype liberal individuals waiting for British actors to help them realise the type of government they desire. In the case of China, it depicts the Chinese as being awoken to the logic of liberal-style intervention in Africa as in everyone's best interests.

The Chinese appear slightly bemused by this line, remaining protective of China's avowed approach of non-interference in Africa, which they see as coming from common experiences of colonialism, developing country and non-aligned status, and their own ability to reduce poverty which is based on their recent unparalleled experience of rapid economic development.[66] Hongying Wang argues that the possibilities for China's socialisation are limited. In a discussion of the ways in which China has begun to become more active in multilateral initiatives, he

[61] Comment made by a DfID official (12 October 2009).
[62] Ibid.
[63] Foreign and Commonwealth Office, *The UK and China: a framework for Engagement*, p. 11.
[64] Conversation with FCO official (1 October 2009).
[65] See, for example, the DfID paper 'Promoting Growth in Africa: working with China', published on the DfID website: {http://www.dfid.gov.uk/Documents/publications/china-africa-factsheet.pdf} cited on 16 October 2009.
[66] Conversation with a Chinese diplomat (4 November 2009).

points to the essentially instrumental approach China takes. 'The PRC's commit-
ment to the principles of qualitative multilateralism is constrained by the govern-
ment's determination to preserve national sovereignty, its insistence on policy
flexibility, and its lingering anxiety that multilateralism may be an instrument
serving American interests in the region.'[67] Multilateralism is 'simply a strategic tool
of the Chinese government. As such, its applicability seems entirely negotiable if the
material conditions should change'.[68] There is already evidence of the limits of
multilateral cooperation from the EU whose efforts to forge closer cooperation with
the Chinese on a range of issues have been frustrated to the point that the European
Council on Foreign Relations report on Chinese cooperation with the EU, has
argued that China is treating the EU 'with diplomatic contempt'.[69]

If China's potential socialisation is as limited as this suggests, how will Britain
cope? Perhaps it will be less of a problem than it might appear, at least in terms
of the British self-conception as a liberal actor. In the concluding section of the
article I will suggest that the continuation of China as villain in Africa might even
provide a sense of relief for British actors. This, I think, highlights a sense of
ambiguity over the potential universalism of liberalism.

Conclusion: suggestions on the dual approach

How can we read this double approach and what might happen next? I explore
here two possible answers. The first pursues the idea that the two approaches might
need and continue to coexist, and the second suggests the idea that interests might
increasingly dominate British policy in Africa, overcoming or at least balancing out
more idealist influences.

First, what might it mean that both demonisation of China and an attempt to
rehabilitate China coexist? I have argued that both contribute to Britain's identity
as a good actor in Africa. The need to demonise China, to see its activity as flat
and alien supports Britain's role in Africa as idealised and good. Such conceptions
are durable – and historically resonant – and find popular representations in the
media. They also amplify existing British conceptions of corrupt African leaders,
Africa's conflicts, Africa's diseases, Africa's conflict and Africa's chaos as malign
and frightening: in other words, they reinforce the ways in which the idea of Africa
has come to constitute British self-identity. At the same time, Britain as a tutor and
civiliser of China also offers a contribution to Britain's self-conception as a
significant world player and liberal evangelist.

And yet the potential socialisation of China must presumably disable oppor-
tunities for demonisation: the two approaches appear contradictory. Julia Kristeva,
in her work on European cosmopolitanism, explores its philosophical struggle with
erasing difference, of extending political order – the concept of universalism –
which she traces to the ancient Greeks who defined the barbarian as the enemy of

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[67] Hongying Wang, 'Multilateralism in Chinese Foreign Policy: the limits of socialization', *Asian Survey*, 40:3 (2000), p. 484.
[68] Ibid., p. 486.
[69] John Fox and Francoise Godement, *Power Audit of EU-China Relations*, European Council on Foreign Relations (17 April 2009).

civilisation. 'And yet the barbarians were fascinating, and, as if echoing the Sophists, writers would distinguish good barbarians from the bad, the best obviously being those who were perfectable – those who could be assimilated into Greek culture.'[70]

Here is an apparent tension between the desire to remain fascinated by difference and the desire to incorporate it. Kristeva traces this tension throughout the history of European thought. 'Difference', she argues, can be understood as both involving the projection of denied aggression, and an enjoyment of watching its progress. This attempt to evacuate and control the uncomfortable or aggressive leads to a form of cosmopolitanism that defines otherness on one's own terms and seeks to subject it to supposedly universal principles.[71]

The perception of China's villainy might therefore be seen as stemming from and reinforcing a British denial of aggression. Whereas Britain is imagined as purely benign in its dealings with Africa, all aggression is projected onto China. The refusal to see China's role as complex – its varied actors, its mixture of motives, the variety of relationships involved – leaves China to represent a mirror image, villain to the British hero. China's otherness provides a depository for the aggression and difference that are denied in the British relationship with Africa.

Moreover, I want to suggest that this projected aggression is associated with an excited fascination: is there something almost pleasurable in the British horror of watching China's supposed venality in Africa? This is an amplification of the tendency to demonise some African political leaders, to dwell on 'the horror' of corruption and conflict that for many provides Africa's most distinguishing features. I am thinking here of the type of writing typified by Robert Kaplan in his article 'The Coming Anarchy' which presents a picture of African descending into a hellish state of chaos and horror.[72] Much of the recent press coverage of China in Africa strikes a very similar note with headlines such as 'How China has created a new slave empire in Africa', 'Why China is trying to colonise Africa' and 'How China is taking over Africa, and why the West should be VERY worried'.[73] Such media coverage reflects the extreme end of 'the horror' but is essentially commensurate with the views expressed by some state elites.

In his discussion of American-Sino relations, Gries describes an ongoing ritual whereby the 'Chinese, like the Americans, project their fears and fantasies onto our bilateral relations',[74] a common theme in international relationships. In this case, aggression and fear, denied in an idealised relationship with Africa, needs a home. As a result, the possibility of political complexity is denied by the projection of extremes of good *and* bad – seen in discourse about 'good guys/bad guys'; 'for

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[70] Julia Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*, trans. Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), p. 52.

[71] Ibid.

[72] Robert Kaplan, 'The Coming Anarchy', *Atlantic Monthly* (February 1994).

[73] Peter Hitchens, 'How China has created a new slave empire in Africa', Mail Online (28 September 2008), {www.dailymail.co.uk/news/worldnews/article-1063198/PETER-HI. . .-How-China-created-new-slave-empire-Africa.html} cited on 14 May 2009; David Blair, 'Why China is trying to colonise Africa', Telegraph.co.uk (1 March 2009), {www.telegraph.co.uk/comment/personal-view/3642345/Why-China-is-trying-to-colonise-Africa.html} cited on 7 May 2009; Andrew Malone, 'How China's taking over Africa, and why the West should be VERY worried', Mail Online (18 July 2008), {www.dailymail.co.uk/news/worldnews/article-1036105/How-Chinas-taking-Africa-West-VERY-worried.html} cited on 7 May 2009.

[74] Gries, *China's New Nationalism*, p. 11.

us/against us'. The idea of Chinese 'bad guys' coming to the defence of Africa's 'bad guys', and undermining the efforts of us, the 'good guys', is a process that is at once understandable and even manageable within the context of an Africa that, although 'other', is known and safe. As such China intensifies the way Britain imagines Africa, and provides relief to its conception of itself.

This tendency to demonise a third actor is clearly not a specifically liberal response to international relationships and the idea of the other. Indeed Kristeva argues that the projection of aggression, rather than the inevitability of rationality, is the basis of what is universal to humans.[75] In his analysis of the online story of China and Africa, Shen finds many references to the superiority of the Chinese approach to that of America and Europe which are 'never sincere' while the 'unconditional aid offered by the Chinese "is not another form of colonialism" but grants the Africans "a sense of confidence that cannot be gained from the Europeans"'.[76] Shen suggests that: 'Africans have become convenient straw men through whom Chinese internet users can project their wished-for Chinese identities.'[77] He captures the blend of contempt for Africans and an idealisation of China's help for Africa which underlines my two points of the projection of aggression and this sense of over-keen involvement in a pathologised Africa.

Finally, the dual British reaction to China in Africa points to an important characteristic of the very idealised liberal cosmopolitanism expressed in relation to Africa; namely a sense of ambiguity about the universality of liberalism. China's dual representation as outlying villain – beyond the 'universal' – and as potential ideological partner, underwrites this ambiguity. Is there simply too much to lose by China's socialisation? On the other hand, keeping the two discourses going draws on a tried and tested approach that allows for the projection and enjoyment of aggression *and* an aspiration to the rationalist fantasy of taming the aggression and enhancing the order and stability of the existing liberal hegemony which China will be brought to appreciate under the tutorship of Britain.

Such a position produces very little more than a familiar underpinning of a particular British self-conception, without enabling more widely productive relationships with either China or Africa. Moreover, with deepening relationships between Chinese and Africans that are beyond British control, it may also be unsustainable. The second explanation of the dual approach sees the emergence of a more rational official discourse as a sign that realism is slipping into the British-Africa relationship, albeit by virtue of British interests in China, and that this may muddy a sense of British idealisation of itself in Africa. Between an idealist view of the relationship with Africa and a more interest-based perspective on the relationship with China, British state actors are caught in the juxtaposition of ideas and interests, and may be forced to contemplate a thicker conception of each relationship.

This could be an attempt to have it all ways, to keep Britain as a 'good' actor in Africa while it works harmoniously with China for its own and Africa's best interests. In other words, rationality overcomes the aggression that Britain is projecting onto China. The socialisation discourse is suggestive here, implying that

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[75] Kristeva, *Strangers to Ourselves*.
[76] Shen, 'A Constructed (un)reality on China's Re-entry into Africa', p. 442.
[77] Ibid.

China is apparently to be enfolded within the benign liberal approach. In this depiction, the realities are smoothed into line rhetorically, through the idea that Britain has a pedagogical relationship with China as the new investor in African development. From a Kristevian perspective, difference has been contained and neutralised by the repression of aggression and an idealisation of universality. As Wong suggests, however, Chinese actors may well be reluctant to play along with this story.

Alternatively, more ambiguity might be allowed to seep into the idealised Britain-Africa relationship and a more complex understanding of Britain and China in Africa would emerge, in which the mixture of realism and idealism is acknowledged. Such an approach would require that self-idealisation is relinquished – both that Britain is purely disinterested in Africa and that Britain can 'tame' China. It would demand better self-awareness, but it might also be symptomatic of a more mature, complex and integrated understanding of both relationships.